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Anti-Soviet Afghans get Soviet missiles

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WASHINGTON — The Russian weapons system most feared by Moslem insurgents in Afghanistan, the MI24 helicopter gunship, is about to meet its match.

And, in the process, the cost of the war to the Soviet Union, and the tactics it follows, are bound to be seriously affected.

Diplomatic sources say the Soviet-made, shoulder-fired SA7, a heat-seeking missile, has been spirited into Afghanistan for use by insurgent forces. Ironically, the weapons are said to come at American urging from Egyptian stocks supplied years ago by the Soviets when Moscow and Cairo were on good terms.

Called the Strella by Western intelligence, the SA7 is aimed in the general direction of a plane or helicopter. When the missile's guidance system senses the heat of the engine it emits a buzz, signaling the soldier to fire. The missile then homes in on the hottest part of the engine and explodes.

Soviet tactics in Afghanistan have been to use helicopter gunships to fly along mountain roads and ridge lines looking for insurgent bands. These are then brought under fire both by jet fighter-bombers and helicopters.

In the steep mountains, the fast-moving jet more often than not misses its prey, darting among boulders. But the helicopter, which is slow and armed with both rockets and machine guns, can be devastatingly accurate.

The MI24 and a newer version, the MI28, are very much feared by the insurgents, analysts say. They have played a large role both in escorting convoys of troops and ammunition, as well as in attacking Moslem strongholds in eastern Afghanistan, along the Pakistan border. In addition, the Russians often use MI8 transport helicopters, each of which carries 35 fully armed troops, to leapfrog behind insurgent units in an effort to encircle them.

So far, the insurgents have had only rifles and light machine guns to counter the helicopters. But since these are heavily armor-plated underneath, it's only

when snipers on mountain peaks could get a shot from above that they could knock down the copters.

During the Vietnam war, when the Russians supplied SA7s to Viet Cong units in the northern region of the country, the United States modified both its equipment and its tactics to compensate.

Steel plates were welded onto helicopter engine exhausts to deflect upward the escaping gases and thus defuse the hot-spot on which the missile could home. Also, in an operation in an area suspected of having SA7s, helicopters often dropped flares to confuse missile homing systems. Finally, both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters flew a lot higher than they normally would, even though they become less accurate in hitting enemy positions, in order to decrease the chances of being shot down.

"When the first MI8 gets shot down, with the loss of 35 soldiers, the Russians are bound to go into a frenzy," one source said. "They'll have to assume that anyplace they fly they may suddenly encounter the SA7."

"Perhaps the generals will simply decide to accept higher losses, of both planes and men, to pursue the war. But you can be sure the pilots will fly higher and fire off their weapons as fast as they can before peeling off."

The Carter Administration will not, of course, admit it is behind the supply of this weapons system to the insurgents. To do so would raise embarrassing questions about how the missiles are smuggled into Afghanistan, through whose territory.

Egypt has admitted it is training Afghan nationalists, although it hasn't said what weapons are featured in the training. It is understood, however, that these include the SA7 and antitank rockets, called RPGs. Presumably the latter have found or will soon find their way into the war too.

For the Soviet Union, which has been relying increasingly on tanks, planes and helicopters to fight the lightly armed insurgents, the supply of sophisticated weapons to them will make the campaign bloodier and costlier.